

The Further I'm Away by Iris Violetta

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Summary: After defeating the Demogorgon, Eleven manages to make her way out of the Upside Down. But once she's back, she finds that nothing is as it seems. Along the way she meets a guarded redhead, her mysterious brother, and a few old friends. Can El help them and find a place to call home? (Epilogue added)

1. Chapter 1

And then there was darkness.

Eleven felt her body buzzing, felt every molecule vibrating and separating. There was a loud noise all around and she suddenly realized it was her; she was still screaming. She wasn't sure how she wasn't out of breath but she was too afraid to stop. If she stopped... she might be stuck there forever. So she pushed hard, screwed her eyes shut, screamed louder than before, so loud her own ears hurt.

Her atoms slowed and contracted back together. She felt solid again and, more importantly, she felt cold. Opening her eyes, the darkness was gone. She'd never been happy to see this place before. She knew the Upside Down. She could work with this.

She was still in the science classroom and there seemed to be no sign of the Demogorgon. She wondered if she'd managed to kill it completely. But she knew better than to assume all was safe so she carefully crept out of the room while deciding her next move. She was tired but still running on adrenaline, partly from fear, partly from victory. Knowing that she didn't have the strength to rip one open on her own, she decided to look for an existing gate. The one in the school seemed to have closed so she decided to head toward the Byers' house.

Walking briskly and keeping alert, El made her way across town, eventually finding herself walking along the small road to Will's house. She remembered the boys calling it Mirkwood and she felt more determined to find her way back to them. Dustin's jokes, Lucas' newfound support, Mike's smile...they gave her energy. And then she saw it, a faint orange glow not far from the road. A gate. It was tiny, barely a few inches, and hidden in a raggedy bush. El hooked her finger in the hole and pulled hard, using the last of her strength. It easily ripped open and she clawed her way past the branches to pull herself through.

And then came the light and the cool, clean smell of the real world. El breathed it in, heart bursting with relief, as she crawled out of the bush. She rolled over onto her back and closed her eyes, fingers

caressing the grass and twigs around her. She was real again.

"Hey!"

El whipped her head around to find a girl standing on the road. She had long red hair, an oversized sweater, dirty Converse sneakers. A scowl on her face that seemed somehow unnatural. She was holding something in her arm, a board with wheels.

"Are you okay?"

Max had been bumming around, as she did most Sunday afternoons, practicing skate tricks on the old road at the edge of the woods. This was one of her favorite spots because no adults were around to force her to wear a helmet. And no kids were around to tease her. Not that she couldn't handle them (she wouldn't admit to herself how much they bothered her).

But after one particularly good kickturn she noticed something rustling in the bushes some yards away. She stopped, expecting a raccoon or maybe a stray dog (she was hoping for the dog) but instead a person crawled out and collapsed in the grass. A girl, maybe her age, pink dress and flannel shirt and no hair. Max called out, praying that the girl would answer because she really didn't feel like going to the police about a dead body.

"Are you okay?" she repeated. El nodded and picked herself up, dusting the stray leaves from her clothes. Max knew she should leave, should turn around and leave the girl alone now that she was confirmed alive. But something kept her there.

"What's your name?" Max asked.

"El." She subconsciously pulled her sleeve further down her arm.

"Max."

A silent moment passed, the two regarding each other, and then El pushed the words out. "Do you know Mike? Wheeler?"

"Uhh, no."

"Dustin? Lucas?"

"No. I just moved here though so I don't really know anyone."

El wished she was better with words and could describe her friends. Instead she looked down the road, wondering which way led to the Wheelers' house.

"Do you, uh, live around here?"

El shook her head and Max twisted her mouth before asking, "Do you wanna come over? I was gonna go have a snack."

She wanted to find her friends, but she was a little nervous about when she did. She had seen the looks on their faces when she left. Would they be mad at her? She came back as quickly as she could...

But Max was waiting for an answer and so El nodded, partly because she was starving.

Max tried not to peek too much at the strange girl next to her as they walked. She was quiet, tiny. Filthy clothes and a dirty face. She wondered if El was hungry, if she was cold. Max knew what it was like to be hungry and cold, to be too proud to ask for help, and that's why she invited her back to the house. That and there was just something about her.

"I like your hair."

El subconsciously grabbed her scalp as she looked over at the redhead.

"Really, it's hardcore."

"Hardcore?" El repeated.

"It's cool," Max said with a shrug and El smiled as she whispered "cool" to herself.

The house was a cheery blue with a large porch. It was nice inside, the furniture looking a little worn but loved, a TV in the corner,

bigger than Mike's. El washed up in the bathroom while Max made boxed mac and cheese. Wearing Max's pajamas, El wolfed down the pasta while sitting on the couch. The redhead watched in amusement, pleased that she was right. El looked up with slight embarrassment to see Max looking at her. "Yummy."

"Mr. B always has mac and cheese in the cupboard, which is pretty cool," Max commented with a shrug.

"You live with your Papa?"

"Uh, no. My dad is dead. So's my mom. They died in a fire when I was little. Mr. B's our foster dad."

She wasn't sure why she was sharing so much, but El was a good listener. Perhaps Max had bottled too much of this, needed the release.

Max didn't mention the memories of that night that still confused her. The crackling in the kitchen, the sparks flying from Billy's fingers. That he pulled her out but left them behind.

But she told El about her journey through the foster system. There were good homes, where the parents were kind and understanding and the other kids fun. And there were bad homes, where people cried and drank and threw things. They never stayed in one place more than a year. Max knew this was largely the fault of Billy and his antics, but he was her brother, her one constant, so she never blamed him.

She was about to ask El about where she came from when the back door opened. Soon a voice called out, "Max? Is that you?"

El turned her head as the man walked into the room. He was not yet middle-aged but had the beginnings of laugh lines and crow's feet on his face. But El recognized him immediately; she could feel it.

"Will."

2. Chapter 2

"Eleven?"

Will stood in the doorway, eyes wide and mouth open, shocked at the sight before him. He had never seen the girl before but he knew who she was, would have known even if she hadn't said his name. She nodded once and continued to stare back at him, clearly as surprised as he was.

"Eleven? Like the number?" Max asked. "Wait, do you guys know each other?" She was confused and the other two seemed to be having a silent conversation.

Will debated what to say, what to reveal. He was still getting used to this parent thing nor had he ever expected this to happen. "Uh, we have mutual friends," he said while mentally smacking himself.

"El, how did you get here?"

"The Upside Down. Where...when is this?"

"It's 2005. It's been over 20 years," he added when she wrinkled her brow.

"Okay, you've gotta be shitting me," Max said as she stood up. Will didn't even bother correcting her language. "Your name is Eleven?"

El nodded and pulled up her sleeve to display her tattoo. Max's expression only became more confused and she swung her head wildly between the two of them. Will took a deep breath and decided to just go with the truth. He didn't know what else to do.

"Eleven and I met before...sort of. It was a long time ago."

"1983," El softly added, still staring at Will. She saw bits of the little boy in his face - the softness of his jaw, the kindness in his eyes.

"Ok, no. No, no, no. Are you punking me?" Max paced the living room, one hand clutching her long hair, but stopped still at the sight of the television remote. It was floating just in front of her face and

slowly circled her head before resting back on the coffee table. Max looked over with wide eyes to see El staring at her, a small drop of blood below her nostril. She'd seen enough sci-fi movies to know what was going on. Flopping on the couch, she nodded and quietly said, "Okay. Tell me everything."

Will gave a half-smile. "There's someone I need to call first."

Will picked up the cordless in his bedroom and bounced on his heels as he listened to the line ring. *Please pick up, please pick up.*

"Hello?"

"Dustin! You have to get over here!"

"Whoa, Will, what's going on?"

"You just - you need to get over here. Now."

"Is everything okay?"

Will sighed. "Eleven."

"What?" He hadn't heard hope like that in Dustin's voice in ages.

"It's Eleven."

Dustin practically cut him off, he was so quick to reply. "I'm leaving now."

"Wait, Du-" He tried to interrupt but Dustin had already hung up.

It was mere minutes before Dustin barreled through the front door without even knocking. He stopped in his tracks at the sight of the girls on the couch, leaving the door wide open behind him.

"Holy shit."

There she was, completely the same, as if no time had passed. Dustin had to glance back at Will to confirm that he was even in the right decade.

"Dustin," she softly said and he had to laugh - she sounded just the same. He made a move to hug her but quickly stopped himself. He was a lot older now and he didn't want to spook her. Instead he asked,

"Where have you been?"

"Upside Down."

"This whole time? Wait, start from when you disappeared. Man, it was crazy what you did," he said with a chuckle. Then his smile dropped and his voice softened. "Thank you, by the way, for that. You saved us."

She gave a weak smile and nod. "I killed the Demogorgon. Then I was in the Upside Down. I walked and found a gate. Then I found Max."

"So wait, how long were there?"

"Not long."

"So...how long ago did you defeat the Demogorgon?"

She shrugged. "Yesterday?"

Will and Dustin exchanged a glance, the latter whispering, "Time travel?"

Will replied, "Maybe the Upside Down..."

"It's a different dimension. It could be a different dimension in time, too," Dustin finished, rubbing his chin. A thousand thoughts fluttered through his mind.

Eleven couldn't stop staring at him; he looked the same but so different. Like looking for your reflection in a pond while it was rippling.

"You're...still you."

Dustin laughed before saying, "Well, of course I'm still me."

Will ordered pizzas and once they arrived the group sat down to eat. Dustin and Will brought her up to speed on everyone.

"I'm the science teacher now. Remember Mr. Clarke? He had a mustache and we told him you were from Sweden?"

El nodded. She remembered the man well; she'd seen him only a few days ago.

"Well, he works at the high school now and I have his old job. Actually, Max is one of my students."

"Mmhmm," Max hummed, mouth full of pizza and feeling put on the spot. She actually liked science but didn't always like studying. Luckily, Will spoke up.

"And I'm working for the paper. My mom still lives in the same house. She's good, but...well, she's been a lot more anxious since I got back."

"Who else did you know...Hopper's still the chief of police."

"Jonathan, my brother, moved to New York."

"Mm, and Nancy is a doctor in Texas. She married Steve Harrington. I don't think you met him, actually..."

"Lucas is in Milwaukee now."

And then she realized the one thing they hadn't talked about, hanging heavy in the air around them, threatening to crush her chest.

"Mike?"

She didn't miss the look that passed between Dustin and Will before the former turned to her with sad eyes.

"He died. In '88."

She heard Dustin's words, but they sounded far away. The memory of her own voice took over: gone, gone, gone.

She came out of it to feel Will's hand on her shoulder but no one would look her in the eye. She set her half-eaten piece back on her plate; she wasn't hungry anymore.

Dustin spent the rest of the evening telling Max the story of that week back in 1983, desperate to fill the silence. Will mostly played with his hands, sometimes adding a detail or two. El didn't seem to be listening but Max was hooked on every word, still half in disbelief. When El started yawning, they decided it was bedtime.

Will walked Dustin out and the two stood on the porch, staring out at the sky. Dustin stuffed his hands in his pockets and sighed.

"I always hoped she would come back, that we were wrong somehow. But..."

"But we never expected it like this."

"No," Dustin breathed out before shaking his head. "You'd think that being grown-ups we'd know what to do."

"Nah. Somehow it makes me know less." Will turned to him with a raised brow. "So, do you want to call him or..."

"Yeah, I'll do it. That's gonna be a fun conversation," Dustin groaned before heading back to his car.

Inside, the two girls were tucked into bunk beds in Max's room. Eleven gently fingered the quilt wrapped around her, thinking that the last time she'd had a proper sleep was a few days ago in the blanket fort.

My parents - they'll get you your own bed.

But that was decades ago and everything had changed. That kind boy, her friend, didn't even exist anymore. And she didn't know where she would go or what would happen. Her face crumpled and she buried it in the pillow.

Max lay on the top bunk wondering about the strange girl beneath her. She could have sworn she heard her crying. Well, whatever...she'd cried plenty of times. This girl would get over it. She

flipped over roughly before hearing familiar footsteps in the hall. Billy was home. She relaxed and let sleep take over.

3. Chapter 3

Dustin sat on the armchair in his living room and looked at the phone, a feeling of dread knotting in his stomach. He wasn't looking forward to this call but he knew...he knew he needed to make it. Sighing one more time, he dialed the number for Lucas' cell.

Lucas didn't even have a house phone these days, always moving about, rarely in one place for more than two years. He was running, and Dustin knew it. Running from a childhood turned sour, from the strange nature of Hawkins, from the pain of what he saw. He left for college and never came back. Dustin and Will still kept in contact with him, but the calls were few and far between.

Lucas answered after three rings. "Hello?"

"Hey, man. It's Dustin." He hoped his voice sounded normal enough.

"Hey! What's up?"

"Oh, well, um...how are you doing?"

"I'm good. Still at the university. Still seeing Jenna."

"That's great!"

"Dustin..."

"...yeah?"

"What's going on? You sound weird."

"Um, yeah. So...are you sitting down?"

"Jesus man, just spit it out."

"Eleven's back." Dustin winced – too fast, too brash, he should have cushioned it more. Lucas didn't respond, but Dustin could hear his breathing, knew he was still listening. "She's still a kid. She's...she came right here. After we saw her...disappear in the classroom, she came right here. I don't think it's even been a full day for her yet."

Lucas continued to be silent. Dustin grappled with what to say next.

"She's staying with Will - you know how he has those foster kids now? Yeah, I guess one of them ran into her on Mirkwood today and brought her home. Kinda like...well, yeah. It's weird man, she's exactly the same. We - we told her about Mike but-

"Stop," Lucas interrupted, his voice low but deadly.

"Lucas, we have to do something. I mean, she's here, what do we do with her? And I bet the gate's open somewhere if she was able to get here."

"Stop. I'm not doing this."

"Lucas."

"I don't want anything to do with her."

"You can't be serious."

"No Dustin, *you* can't be serious. You want to get involved again, fine. She's your problem. I can't..." He paused and Dustin could feel the anger through the phone. "She killed him. And I'll never forgive her."

Dustin didn't know how to respond, just sat silent.

"Don't call me about her again." Lucas ended the call without any goodbye.

Lucas knew it wasn't really her fault, knew she couldn't have done anything, but he could feel the tendrils of rage inside him. He felt a little guilty about it, but it was easier to blame her than...well, than to blame Mike. Plus, he never thought they'd see her again. It was easy to hate someone from afar and he'd been doing it for years. He tried not to picture the little girl he once knew, who was probably at this very moment terrified. Instead he let himself remember that night in '88, as he did every so often, usually with a few glasses of whiskey. He poured himself one now.

It was a November night, chilly with a large moon. They were at a bonfire party in the woods, which was odd for them. But Mike's lab

partner had invited him and he insisted on going, so Lucas joined him. November was always hard for Mike and Lucas hoped this would be a fun distraction. He himself didn't drink (his dad would kill him), but Mike had a few beers. But he seemed strange all night and Lucas wondered if he had been drinking before they even went. After a while he suggested a walk in the woods and Lucas hoped it would help clear his head.

The walk was largely silent and at one point Lucas excused himself to pee. He had turned his back for 10 seconds, just a quick piss, only to find Mike gone. Calling for him, he walked out of the edge of the woods and saw Mike standing thirty yards away. At the edge of the quarry.

"Mike."

"You weren't here that day."

Lucas felt his stomach flip, knowing exactly which day Mike was referring to. "Mike, let's go back to the fire."

Lucas had thought things were better. The past few years...yeah, he was quieter now, more withdrawn than before, but he'd been better. There were some smiles now, less outbursts. He'd seem determined to move on. Mike looked back at his friend, swaying dangerously on the edge.

"She's in my dreams, Lucas. Every night. She's stuck there."

And that's when Lucas realized he'd been wrong. Mike *had* been determined - to find Eleven.

"Mike, please. Let's go back." He wanted to say more, to say that she was gone, that he was sad too, that he still cried about it some nights. But first he had to get his friend back to safety.

And then Mike laughed. He laughed and Lucas felt his heart freeze.

"Don't you hear her, Lucas? She's calling. She's here." Mike turned his head forward again and lightly stepped off the cliff as Lucas screamed. For that second, that second of in-between time, he prayed that Mike was right, that Eleven would come. One look at the water

proved otherwise.

The rest of the night remained a blur. Lucas vaguely remembered the glow of police lights and vomit on his shoes. Afterwards he didn't get out of bed for a week. Everyone thought it had been an accident, a simple drunken mistake, and he let them. Dustin and Will were the only ones to know the truth and even then he didn't tell them everything. They didn't see Mike's face. They didn't hear the strange timbre of his voice, the last words he would ever say. And they didn't have that second of in-between, that moment of horror and hope. Lucas felt like he was stuck in that moment. It followed him from Indiana to Illinois to Wisconsin. It never left him.

The glass shattered easily as he threw it into the sink. He barely gave the shards a glance before leaving the room.

4. Chapter 4

The week passed, feeling almost like a dream for all. Eleven felt déjà vu as she explored a world that was new to her all over again. Max tried to wrap her head around all the things she never knew were possible. Will and Dustin struggled to keep their emotions from bubbling over.

On Monday El mostly slept, while Max and Billy were at school and Will at work. It was partly to make up for the long days she'd had, but also because...well, it was easier to sleep than to fully process her situation.

But then Max came home from school, Billy on her heels and Eleven was finally able to meet him. He strode in behind his sister, tall with a handsome face.

"Well, you must be the famous El. I've hearing about you all day. I was wondering who could have made my sister actually like them," he said as he slung an arm around Max's shoulders. She punched his side but looked up at him with a smirk. Shrugging out from under his arm she went over to sit next to El at the table.

"That's Billy. He's okay, I guess."

Billy chuckled and stuck out his hand to shake El's. She felt a strange energy in the air but ignored it as she stood up and reached out her hand. The moment they touched there was a large spark that shocked them both and they quickly jumped back from one another. El looked down at her hand as her fingers tingled and the air crackled around her.

Billy threw on a charming smile and said, "Sorry, must be from walking on the carpet with my socks." He gave them a nod and headed for the stairs. Max stared at the table and swallowed hard. But she perked up when El floated a cookie over to her.

"This is so sick. What else can you do?" El, wanting to feel useful, wanting to make this girl happy, showed her tricks all afternoon.

Max's eyes sparkled.

Will came home after work with Eggos and insisted on having breakfast for dinner. El ate them and while they were delicious, the whole thing felt bittersweet.

On Tuesday, El played with the television, surprised to find a much larger variety than she had a week ago. She felt safer now than she had then, but she was still uneasy. There was a strange atmosphere in the house, a cloying stench, almost reminiscent of the Upside Down. It intensified whenever Billy was home.

She tried to distract herself with the pile of comics and skateboard magazines that Max leant her.

When the two came home from school, Billy stomped through the door in a huff, Max trailing behind sheepishly. He didn't even spare a glance El's way before rushing up the stairs to his room.

"He has a migraine," Max said, giving a small smile. El could tell the smile was fake.

After dinner, Max groaned as she tried to study for her science quiz, tempted to ask Eleven to convince her teacher to cancel it since they were old friends. But El was out in the living room with Will, watching American Idol. Well, they would be if the television would stop cutting out.

After a while El wandered into the bedroom to find Max slumped on her floor, moaning.

"What's wrong?"

"I have a stupid quiz tomorrow and studying sucks."

"Quiz?"

"Like a little test," Max replied and El nodded in understanding. She picked up Max's textbook and looked at it, liking the colorful and intricate drawings.

"What are these?"

"They're drawings of cells. That's what my quiz is on - the different parts."

El looked at her with a thought. "Teach me."

"Huh?"

"About cells. For your quiz."

"Okay." Max went over the different parts, pointing them out in the book and explaining their functions. She also included a few anecdotes from her class, like Cory Wallace accidentally saying "orgasm" instead of "organism." The joke was lost on El, but Max's laugh was contagious. Their giggles drifted into the hall and Will smiled.

Then came a loud pop and the sound of shattering. They found Billy sitting on his bed, smoke rising from the lamp on the other side of the room. With a tight smile, he shrugged.

"The bulb burst."

On Wednesday Dustin sat in his classroom, the last bell already rung and the students gone for the day. He was trying to grade quizzes but found himself getting distracted. As annoying as that was, he couldn't blame himself - the thing he'd wanted for so long had finally happened. Of course schoolwork paled in comparison.

Dustin had wanted great things. Had wanted MIT, NASA, some major discovery. But the years spent trying to find Eleven with no success made him feel like a failure. The little voice in his head, the one telling him that he wasn't good enough, wasn't smart enough, grew louder and louder until he couldn't hear anything else. So he stayed close to home, going to Indiana University and eventually working at his old school.

He tried for years without telling the others. Will always looked guilty when Eleven was brought up, he didn't want to get Mike's hopes up and Lucas nursed a small dark rage that Dustin knew was

from feeling useless. He didn't want to make anything worse. But he'd done little experiments, had researched all he could, spent hours in the woods and by the lab and in the AV room. All without a single scrap of success. Now he berated himself for never considering the possibility that the Upside Down could function as a separate dimension in both space *and* time. It didn't matter that he wouldn't have been able to do anything with that information; the little voice was back: *You're not good enough, not smart enough, you should have known.*

Dustin looked guiltily at the papers on the desk before him. There was nothing wrong with teaching; he was quite good at it actually. It just wasn't what he had pictured for himself.

On Thursday, Max arrived home in a rush, breathing heavy after skating all the way home. At the sight of her wild eyes, Eleven asked what was wrong. Max simply gave a shrug. Leaning forward, El said, "We're friends now, right?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"Friends don't lie." They stared at each other for a moment longer and she could see Max's eyes soften. She wondered if Max was new to having friends too.

"Okay, so Billy got into a fight with Josh Morgan, this huge jock, like linebacker, in the parking lot during last period. I didn't see it, but I guess Josh got hit bad - there was blood all over the ground. Anyway, Mr. B had to come and they were meeting with the principal so I just skated home," Max said in one breath before taking another. She didn't want to admit it, but she was spooked. It had been a long time since Billy had done something so...violent. She'd seen the blood splattered on the pavement, splotches that burned into her eyes.

She might have continued but they saw Will's car pull into the driveway. By the time the girls stepped onto the porch, Billy was halfway across the yard and Will hustled after him.

"We are not done here!" He sternly said as he grabbed Billy's arm to stop him. The boy shook him off but turned around.

"What?" he snapped angrily, throwing up his hands. "What are you gonna say? You gonna give me some *fatherly* advice?"

"What were you thinking back there? You could have seriously injured that boy. You could have killed him."

"What do you care?"

"I care because I want you to be okay. I want you to be you. I don't think this is you."

Billy hesitated and Will saw something in his eyes - was it anger, was it pain? In a low voice he said, "You don't know anything about me."

"Then let me. I want to help you." He took another step toward Billy, but the latter grabbed his head and closed his eyes and growled.

"LEAVE ME ALONE!"

His voice rose with each word and then he was cut off by a loud crack. Sparks showered down from the utility pole at the edge of the yard. While Will was distracted by stomping out stray sparks in the grass, Billy fled.

Will looked back at the girls, his face pale. "El, was that you?"

She shook her head and he sighed. Max felt her hands shake but said nothing.

At three in the morning, Will awoke to noise from the hall. Billy had finally returned, and from the sounds of it, was intoxicated. He sat up but then hesitated. Perhaps it would be better to talk to him in the morning. What he saw that afternoon...it chilled him.

On Friday Will took the day off, wanting to spend a little time with Eleven without the kids or Dustin around. He had wondered about the girl for years, wishing he could have known her like his friends had. She'd clearly left an impression on them.

When Will was a small boy he'd dreamed of adventures - with his brother, with his friends, even alone. He wanted to see new places,

meet new people, combine art and science and life. He wanted more than Hawkins could give him. But after 1983 everything changed. Every opportunity he had to grow and leave, every urge, was crippled by fear. *What if you fail?* he'd think. *What if you can't do it?* He stayed home with his mom, drove to the nearest community college for classes, and closed the door on his dreams. But he still managed to build a quiet life, working at the Hawkins paper, buying his own home, making a few friends in the community. And when he did a story on a local foster family, one who had helped several children live happy lives, something in his heart felt like this might be right for him. Billy and Max were his first placements, and while it was certainly an adjustment, he was enjoying it. He had never really thought about being a father before. Lonnie had never been a great example. But Will already found himself caring for these kids more than he could have imagined, and that made Billy's recent behavior all the more troublesome.

Will could sense that there was something unnatural going on with the boy, something that felt a little close to home. For years after he returned, Will would periodically get sick and throw up slugs. Strange slimy creatures who would disappear into the drain every few months. But as bad as the slugs were, the visions were worse. Every time he had a flash of the Upside Down he feared that he would be stuck there. And while the slugs had eventually stopped, he still sometimes had visions of that other dimension. It had been maybe a year since the last time, but he could clearly remember the gasping breaths, the panic tightening his heart.

He tried to keep those thoughts out of his head as he took El to see his mother. But she was as clairvoyant as ever, softly asking, "Do you still have the visions?"

Will kept his eyes on the road, even though he was startled. "Um, yes. Haven't had one in a while though."

El nodded sagely and Will suddenly had a strong yearning to have always known her, to have had her beside him when he was ill and confused, to have had someone who truly understood. He wondered what his life would have been like. Instead he asked, "Excited to see my mom?"

El smiled and nodded happily. Remembering the way Joyce would talk about the girl, Will knew she would be just as excited to see her as Dustin was. He made sure to call ahead and explain the situation beforehand. Joyce was the last person who needed a surprise, having become skittish and slight as she aged. However, when they pulled up the drive, she was standing on the porch with a smile spread across her face. El had been nervous but immediately relaxed in the woman's presence. She was just as she had been before - warm, soft, kind. Joyce reached out to envelope her in a hug. El noticed her trembling hands and thought she seemed thinner than she had the last time she held her.

"Oh my girl, you're just as brave as ever, aren't you?" she whispered into El's ear and the latter held her tighter. Her voice took the girl back to that night, back to the gym, where Barb was dead and rotting but Mike was alive and breathing and beside her.

They spent the afternoon catching up over tea and snacks, Joyce bringing out the photo albums for El to peruse. Will explained some of his concerns about Billy and Joyce sighed heavily. As El lost herself in the old photos of Halloweens and school dances and graduations, Joyce washed the dishes, Will drying by her side. After a few minutes, Joyce softly spoke, keeping her eyes on the cup in her hands.

"You know, you should go visit Hopper. He might know things."

Will looked over at his mom and raised his eyebrow. She gave a weak half smile in response.

"He worked with the lab for while. Back before it closed."

She said nothing more and Will chewed on the inside of his cheek. Hopper worked with the lab? How had he never known that? When did that even start? Will was still a little frightened of the chief, even though he had saved his life, but the events of the past week had become concerning.

Well, he knew what he was doing tomorrow.

5. Chapter 5

Jim Hopper rubbed his hand over his face and tossed the files onto his table. This case was going to be what forced him into retirement. Two nights ago was the third arson in a month. But while the first two had been old farm sheds at the outskirts of town, this one was the Wayside Diner. Not an abandoned barn - a business, someone's livelihood, a spot for folks to gather and eat and chat. A place that was once long ago called Benny's Burgers. Hopper worried that another arson was just around the corner and that this time someone would get hurt. Or worse. They'd had no leads and after a morning chasing after dead ends, Hopper had retreated home to work in peace.

He still lived in the same trailer, largely unchanged over the years. He had a sizable amount of money stashed away from working with the lab back in the 80s, but felt uncomfortable spending it. It had always felt a little like blood money.

He was surprised by the knock on his door and even more when he opened it. Will Byers and Dustin Henderson, neither of whom he had spoken to in a while. He still often thought of them as the little boys they once were. Same with the Sinclair boy and...well, Mike he could only picture as the body he had pulled from the water. He'd seen too many bodies in his career and that had been one of the worst. But he didn't have time to think about that now because in between the two young men stood a little ghost. She looked up at him with the same brown eyes as before and for a moment he wondered if Sara was just behind her.

Will cleared his throat before asking if they could come in. Hopper simply nodded and opened the door wider for them to walk through, Eleven whispering "thank you" as she passed. The two young men were quick to give the chief the rundown on the past week.

Hopper sat back in his chair and studied the three on the couch. "Well, as much as I like the social call, I have a feeling you're here for more."

"Look, my mom...she said you might know stuff. That you worked

with the lab." Will flicked his eyes away from the man's grizzled face, feeling too accusatory.

"I did."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Dustin asked.

"You were kids. I was protecting you. And anyway, they were paying me to keep things quiet."

"What things?"

"How you came back." Hopper gestured to Will before looking at Eleven. "How they were looking for you." He shrugged. "Other experiments."

"Like?"

"I dunno, I wasn't the one running them," Hopper growled before calming himself. He looked over at El, who had folded herself into the corner of the couch. She stared back at him, eyes looking tired but determined. "They looked for you for years, kid. Guess it makes sense now that they couldn't find you."

He chuckled, almost to himself. "I kept leaving food for you. In this box in the woods. Must have really been raccoons or something."

El didn't know what to say, how to react. Everything was her fault and she sank further into the couch. Dustin coughed and said, "Chief, we need help. We need something here. The gate's open again. And strange things are happening."

Will added, "Billy, my foster son. Something is going on with him and I think it's related."

Hopper raised an eyebrow and nodded for him to continue. Will explained about Billy's mood swings, about the odd incidents with the lights and cables.

"It might just be the gate or something else, but I really feel like it's connected to him. I'm worried."

"Do you know anything...remember anything from the lab?" Dustin asked.

"Well, they kept me on 'til about, uh, '91, I think. You know, end of the Cold War. I think they shut down a lot of the programs they were working on, took a new approach. I know they're still working out there, but I don't think it's as, well, 'robust' as it used to be."

"Please?" El asked, speaking for the first time since entering the trailer. Hopper sighed, knowing he couldn't say no to a plea like that.

"Look...I'll see if I can take a look around. I'm not promising anything though."

Having settled that, they made moves to leave, El going to the bathroom first. The chief looked down the hall as she went and quietly asked, "She know about Wheeler?"

"Yeah. We didn't really go into the details though."

"I remember she followed him like a puppy that night."

Dustin and Will kept their eyes on the floor, unsure of what to say. Hopper sighed again.

"I'll do my best."

Max wasn't having a good day. Will had taken El somewhere but wouldn't let her come with, Billy had yelled at her at the breakfast table and to top it off one of her skateboard's wheels had come loose. She just couldn't catch a break. She grumbled to herself on the porch and glared at the neighbors walking by.

She felt bad but she was a little jealous of Eleven. A girl with superpowers and a mysterious past, who seemed to be in the middle of an adventure. And Max was at home wallowing and feeling left out. She rolled her eyes and reminded herself that El was nice, she was cool. She had said they were friends. And she was probably scared. She ignored the fact that she was jealous of El taking Will's attention.

Instead she thought about Billy, who had snarled at her this morning over burnt toast. Max loved her brother but deep down she feared him. He was her blood and he'd been with her every step of the way, the only constant in her life. He was hers, he wasn't going anywhere. He'd defended her against bullies, against a particularly cruel foster dad. It was easy to brush those other thoughts aside, to keep them locked deep inside. When she thought of her brother, she felt safe and warm and home but sometimes it was hot and fear and flames. The crackling of his hands, the vision that followed her. The way his eyes took on the glint of a knife's edge and his words cut. Did she want to please him because she loved him? Or was she afraid of what would happen if she didn't? She wasn't sure. She pushed the thought away.

Hopper stood outside the fence, large wire cutter in hand. The more he thought about it, thought about the years spent searching and then the years spent wondering and then the years spent forgetting, the more he was determined to actually help them. He'd already seen what happened the last time a gate was torn open between worlds; who was to say it wouldn't be worse this time? He tried to ignore the déjà vu as he cut into the fence.

Will knew what he needed to do. He and Dustin couldn't do it alone, not when Lucas was still out there. He forcefully punched each number and frowned as he heard Lucas pick up.

"Will?"

"Lucas. You need to come home." He put on his sternest voice.

"Will, I told Dustin -"

"No. You need to come home. Now."

"I can't see her -"

"She is a little girl. You are a grown man. You need to come home. We need your help."

Lucas sighed but said no more. Will clutched the phone tighter.

"Please, Lucas. Do it for me. For Dustin. We need you."

There was a pause, just long enough for Will's heart to clench, before Lucas finally replied.

"Okay."

"Yeah?"

"Okay. I'll be there."

"Lucas?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"I'll see you soon, buddy."

6. Chapter 6

Lucas made it to Hawkins by Monday morning and he could only waste so much time at his parents' house before heading over to Dustin's. Even though he had given himself several pep talks during the trip, he still sat in his car for twenty minutes before gathering the courage to walk up to the door. Will and El had already arrived and were sitting at the kitchen table. The guys had prepared him but he still felt a little shock at seeing her again. It didn't help the nerves in his gut.

And even though Dustin had told him, even though he knew it to be true, the question had to be asked.

"After you defeated it, the Demogorgon, you came right here? You didn't do anything else?"

El stared at him (another friend grown up in a flash) and seemed to know what he was thinking. They hadn't told her the details, but she knew...she knew he was referring to Mike somehow. She emphasized each word. "Friends don't lie."

"You promise?"

She simply nodded, the word "promise" feeling wrong on her tongue. Lucas gently grabbed her shoulder, the corners of his mouth twitching.

"It's good to see you, weirdo."

Hopper arrived around four that afternoon with a heavy file box, his hair a mess and eyes looking like he hadn't slept in days.

"Okay, boys, here you go. I went through most of it and put all the files that I thought you might want to take a look at on top." He took the top folder and dropped it on the table. "Project Pollywog."

"Project what?"

"Pollywog. 1984 to 1991." He surreptitiously glanced at Will before

continuing. "After we brought Will back, the lab kept tabs on him. Wanted to see if he'd exhibit any side effects or changes after being in there so long."

They all looked at Will, who asked, "How long were they watching me?"

"Years."

"Did you know about it?" Will looked at the chief, his eyes a mix of fear and anger.

Hopper paused before responding. "Yes. But I didn't know about what they found."

"What did they find?" Dustin asked.

"Will, maybe you want to explain?"

Dustin and Lucas both whipped their heads to stare at Will, who looked hesitant. They thought they had shared everything. To think that Will had been harboring secrets...it seemed impossible. They both ignored the fact that they each had their own secrets. El gave Will an encouraging smile. He nodded back and explained what happened after he returned, the slugs, the visions. Once he was done, he rubbed his neck sheepishly. Dustin sat back in his chair with an exhale.

"Byers, I can't believe you never told us. That's wild."

"I didn't want to worry anyone. I was terrified of making it worse for everyone."

Lucas patted his shoulder. "It's okay man, we get it. We just wish we could have helped."

Dustin nodded in agreement. "So when was the last time you saw a slug?"

"1990."

"And the last time you saw the Upside Down?"

"Maybe a year ago."

"Damn."

Hopper picked up the folder again and started pulling out papers. "Yeah, well, while they were watching him they found out about the slugs. It doesn't look like they figured out the visions part though. But they captured some of the little buggers and experimented on them."

He passed papers around the table, Dustin especially eager to get his hands on them. El looked through a stack of photos. They took time reading through them, each sharing what they were learning as they went.

"They tried to breed them."

"Yeah, looks like they were successful."

"They were mostly interested in the mucus, you know, the snail slime. They tested it on rats, put it in their food."

"Look here, they ramped it up to just giving it to the rats straight. It was like the rats were on steroids. Super strong, super smart."

"Guys, they moved on from rats. They started experimenting on humans."

"What?"

"Yeah, looks like they told the subjects it was drug experimentation."

"Guess some people will do anything for cash."

"They watered it down at first. Just a little bit of mucus in a cup of water."

"Yeah, but it didn't take much. See, these subjects were getting only 10% strength and they were already exhibiting symptoms."

"The subjects didn't really react like the rats though. Like they were mentally affected but it didn't make them hyper intelligent. At least not in the watered-down state."

"What do you mean?"

"It like heightened their emotions. Some went manic, a few totally depressed, one developed high anxiety. It affected each one differently. Most of them reported hearing voices. A few even had hallucinations. One guy was convinced that his mother's ghost was with him, he kept seeing and hearing her."

"Shit."

"They look sad. In the photos."

"Okay, so what happened when they gave them stronger doses?"

"They didn't. Program was shut down while they were in the middle of phase one human experimentation."

"Probably around the end of the Cold War. A lot of things over there changed then."

"This is insane."

Lucas leaned over the table and sighed. "I might have something that could help."

"What?"

"It's at my house. I'll go grab it and be right back."

He grabbed his jacket and swiftly walked out. Hopper reached back into his bag and pulled out another file.

"I did a little more digging. About those kids," he said, looking at Will. "Look here, Gerald and Susan Sanford - that's their parents - lived in Hawkins right after they got married. He was over at the steel mill and she did some secretary work at the bank. And here, look at this, look where they lived."

Will followed Hopper's finger and raised his brows. "That was practically next door to me. They would have been my nearest neighbors. I don't...I guess I don't remember them. Do you think my mom would?"

"I dunno. They only lived there a year; they moved to Bloomington in '89. She was pregnant at the time and they were having complications so they moved to the city. Better doctors." The chief shrugged.

Will looked up at him. "Billy. Billy was born in '89."

Dustin chimed in. "Do you think...?"

"It could all be a coincidence but it's pretty weird."

They heard the door open; Lucas was back. He placed a worn folder stuffed with loose papers on the table.

"Mike's mom gave this to me after..." He shrugged, unable to finish the sentence. "It's his old D&D campaigns. I guess she thought I might want them. But there's other stuff in here too. He wrote like journal entries sometimes." Lucas didn't mention that the folder had first sat on his desk unread for a year, that he finally opened it on the first anniversary of that November night, that by the time he was done reading his face was covered in tears and snot, that some of it still haunted him.

"Some are like typical high school stuff or movies he liked. But..." Lucas rifled through them, pulling out specific pages. "Here, read these."

Dustin took the loose leaf papers from him and read them aloud.

11/12/84

It's been a year. A whole year. Winter, spring, summer, fall. I can't believe it's been that long. Will is different now. He doesn't want us to know, but we can tell. But I think we're all different now. Sometimes I think I'm forgetting what she looked like but then she'll show up in a dream. She's always happy in my dreams.

5/27/86

I hear her voice sometimes. I swear I hear it. And I can't tell if I'm just crazy or if she's reaching out to me. She could be trying to talk to me from the Upside Down. What if she's stuck there? I wish I could talk to the guys

about it. I don't think they'll believe me. They never talk about her. They probably think she's dead. And if Lucas gives me one more look I'm going to scream.

8/15/88

I've been hearing her a lot lately. And sometimes I dream about her, but it's not really like I dream about her as much as she's in my dream...I don't know if that even makes sense. Like it feels like she put herself there, instead of my brain thinking her up. I don't know. I just wonder if she's there for a reason.

11/2/88

It's every night now. She's in all of my dreams. Sometimes we're doing normal dream stuff or something fun. But a lot of times she's just looking at me, trying to talk but I can't hear her. I think she's asking for help. I don't know what to do. But I have to do something.

Dustin finished reading and looked up at the others.

Lucas said, "They sound like those files. It was all I could think of when you read them before."

El stared at the paper in Dustin's hands without seeing anything. All that time, Mike thought it was her. All that time... She didn't notice the few tears that escaped down her cheeks. But Will saw.

"Hey, hey this is not your fault. El. El, look at me. This is not your fault. Mike would not blame you for this," he implored, kneeling in front of her chair to look her in the eyes. Her face scrunched up and she leaned onto his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her and wondered if this was what fatherhood felt like.

"Is it possible that he was infected somehow?" Hopper asked.

"I had a voice too." The others looked at Dustin in surprise. "I would hear this voice, more and more, telling me that I wasn't good enough, that I - that I wasn't smart enough. That I should have figured out how to find El. I figured it was just my mind, that maybe the stress was making me crazy, that everything it said was true." He paused, drawing in a deep breath. "Maybe...maybe I was infected too."

"Do you still hear it?" Hopper asked quietly.

Dustin nodded. "Sometimes."

Will looked at Dustin with shocked eyes and whispered, "Me too. I thought it was just me."

"Wait, you-"

"Yeah. I thought it was just my thoughts, you know? But it would tell me everything that could go wrong. How I could get hurt, how others could get hurt. It's why - it's why I never did the things I wanted to do. You know, I wanted to move to New York and live with Jonathan? But I was so...*afraid* to leave Hawkins. I'd say to myself, you won't make it, you won't be okay. But maybe it wasn't me saying those things."

"Oh my god," Lucas suddenly said as he dropped his head into his hands. "Me too. Mine was so angry, it made me so angry. It made me hate everyone. Because they didn't know or understand or they...God, it made me want to leave everyone behind. And I knew that it wasn't anyone's fault, I'd tell myself that but another part of me didn't care. I was tense all the time, I had to go to a chiropractor. I was grinding my teeth...I still do. It hasn't really gone away, any of it."

Standing up from the table, Dustin began to pace, furiously thinking. "Okay, so it's obvious that Will was infected. And let's say, at least for argument's sake, that we're *all* infected. How would that happen?"

Lucas leaned his head on his hand. "We must have ingested it somehow. The mucus."

"Do you think the lab was messing with us?" Dustin asked. Will's face turned white.

"No, it was me," he softly said, staring off at the wall. "I threw them up in the sink."

Dustin stopped pacing. "You mean they got into the sewers?"

"No. My house is on the edge of town. We had a septic tank, and a well system." He swallowed hard. "I contaminated our water. And

you guys were at my house a lot after I got back. You must have drank it hundreds of times."

Hopper spoke up. "But what about your mom? And Jonathan?"

"No, it makes sense. My mom's anxiety got so bad after that. I just thought it was because she'd gone through something traumatic. But...maybe she was infected. And Jon...he always blamed himself for my disappearance. He got really dark and angry and said that he wasn't good enough for us. And then he moved away. 'Cause he thought it was better for us." He looked around the table at their faces, his eyes wide. "No, it makes total sense."

"Why was Mike's the worst?" Dustin asked.

"I don't know. Maybe...maybe because we just thought it was our thoughts and he thought it was Eleven?"

"He didn't know if she was really out there or if he was going crazy," Lucas said, staring at his hands.

There a solemn pause and then Hopper cleared his throat.

"So now the question is: how does Billy factor into all this?"

7. Chapter 7

Hopper blared the police sirens as he barreled across town. Dustin sat beside him and the others squeezed in the back, anxious and a little overwhelmed with all this new information. It had been Will's idea to go to Joyce - perhaps she would know something about Billy's parents since they had been neighbors at one point. El wondered if Max was safe at home.

Joyce didn't seem surprised to see them when they arrived, although it had been years since she and Hopper talked about anything but the weather. She had once thought, long ago...but no, no that was just silly now. A silly dream. She quickly ushered them in, sensing that they weren't here for pleasantries. They gave her an abbreviated rundown of the situation and once they'd finished, she stared at her son.

"Will...all those years?"

He looked at her, the pain on her face, the tears in her eyes. This was what he had always tried to avoid. A weak shrug was all he could offer. "Yeah. I didn't want to worry you."

She shook her head in exasperation before pulling him in for a hug. "So, we're all infected?"

Will chuckled before sitting back. "Maybe. Do those symptoms sound familiar to you? I thought maybe...your anxiety?"

A wry smile on her face, she thought for a moment. "It does. It really does. I think you guys might be right."

Hopper asked, "And this couple - Gerald and Susan Sanford - do you remember them at all? They lived over where the Thompsons are now."

She smiled and nodded. "I do actually. I didn't know him well, he worked a lot, but she was real sweet. Had this beautiful long red hair, could have been Anne of Green Gables. She was working only part-time and she would come visit sometimes during the weekdays. I

don't think she had a lot of friends - they had just moved here." She chuckled lightly. "I remember when she told me she was pregnant. She was so excited, just glowing."

"And she drank the water? When she would come over?"

Joyce shrugged. "I don't specifically remember, but it's not like any of us were drinking bottled water back then. I'm sure she drank it."

"When did they move? How pregnant was she?"

"Oh I don't know...I mean, she was definitely showing. I had known she was pregnant for a while, and that she was having some trouble. Maybe six months along? I'm not sure. They moved so they could be closer to the big hospital."

"Did you ever hear from her?"

"I think I got a birth announcement, but that was about it. I really haven't thought about her that much since then. I can't believe they died so young."

Dustin spoke up. "So Billy would have been infected in the womb. That's major. Being infected during development...I can't imagine the effects. It would put those lab rats to shame."

"Do you think he has powers?"

Joyce locked eyes with Hopper, both immediately thinking of Terry Ives. They were hesitant to bring it up with Eleven in the room. The chief coughed.

"I can't say how I know this, but El got her powers in the womb."

Eleven stared at him, and he avoided her eyes. She wanted to ask how he knew, what else he might know, but decided to save it for later. It could wait.

The boys looked at each other. "Shit."

"Do you think that fire...?"

"I don't know, but Max might know something. We probably shouldn't have left her alone."

Max was sitting on the kitchen counter, milk carton in hand, when she heard the front door open. She crossed her fingers that it was Billy, who had skipped school, that he was back to apologize, to go back to normal, or at least the semi-normal that she was used to. Instead Mr. B and El walked in, along with her science teacher, some guy she didn't know and...the chief of police? What was going on?

"Uh, 'sup guys?" She asked, wiping off her milk mustache. They stood there awkwardly as Will stepped forward to take the carton.

"We need to talk about Billy."

She tensed up. She knew this was coming. El reached for her hand.

"Please?"

Max nodded and they retreated to the living room. Dustin spoke first.

"Max, do you remember the fire?"

She stared at the carpet and Will placed a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay. We know you were really young."

She continued to keep her eyes trained on the floor, but shared her story. "I was four and I woke up thinking there was a monster in the house. It smelled weird and there were noises outside my room. I wanted to be brave so I went to investigate. I found Billy in the kitchen. The curtains were on fire and the stove was making this *cracking* sound. The floor was wet and smelled so bad, like a gas station. Billy grabbed me and pulled me outside and we hid in the neighbor's yard. He didn't...he never seemed scared. And..." She paused.

"Yeah?"

"There was something wrong with his hands. They were glowing, they almost looked like sparklers. But when he pulled me outside they were fine. I don't know...I've never been sure if I made that part

up or not. It seems crazy. I was so little."

"I don't think you made it up." They explained their theory about Billy, and she listened with wide eyes, hugging herself close.

"Do you think any of this makes sense?"

Max nodded slowly. "Yeah. I mean, he's always had these mood swings and strange things would happen...lights going out and computers breaking. But..." She looked up at Will. "He's my brother. I know he's good, somewhere in there."

"I believe you. I want to help him."

She could tell he was being sincere and let herself calm down.

"Okay, well I think we can agree that he's been way worse the past week or so."

"Since El got here." She gave El an apologetic half smile and she shrugged in return.

"Do you think that opening the gate affected him?"

El shook her head. "The gate was already open. I just made it bigger."

"I think it's El. There can only be one, y'know?" Dustin said, his eyes lighting up.

"This isn't a fantasy novel," Lucas groaned.

"Hey, D&D came in handy last time, I'm just saying," he replied, holding his hands up in defense.

"Fiiine."

El stood up and looked around at them all. "I think it's me. It's too much. It...makes him worse."

They were interrupted from further discussion by the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. Billy was home.

Billy was in a rotten mood. Skipping school and throwing rocks in the quarry hadn't helped, nor had zipping in his car along the highway. Strange thoughts and feelings swirled throughout his mind and he couldn't get rid of them. His fingers itched.

When he got out of the car he saw the group standing on the porch. Even the police chief...this couldn't be good. They stared at him in silence.

"You know, you're supposed to hide during a surprise party," he called as he sauntered across the yard.

"Billy, we just want to talk," Will said. Billy stopped in his tracks.

"What is this, a fucking intervention?"

"We know about the fires, kid," Hopper said as he stepped off the porch.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Billy, we know about the fires, about all the weird stuff that happens. We know what you can do," Will said.

"You don't know anything about me!"

"We know what killed your parents."

Billy saw red and his hand twitched. He struggled to keep his voice even. "Shut up."

"We can help you, okay? We want to help you."

They could see Billy's hands shaking. A couple sparks flew from the utility pole at the edge of the yard. "You can't do anything!"

"Do you want to be like this forever?"

"There's nothing wrong with me!" Billy shouted and he started walking toward them. Sparks fell from his fingertips, and blue electric currents ran up his arms.

"Holy shit!"

Hopper pulled out his gun and fired a few shots at his legs, but Billy waved his hand and they flew off in the wrong direction. Soon all of Hopper's bullets lay scattered in the grass. Max ran out, slipping past the adults.

"Billy! Please," she begged as she stood in front of him, tears in her eyes. "Please let us help. Please, do it for me."

He roughly grabbed her arm, and she screamed, feeling his hand sear her skin. But it was only a moment, as he was soon thrown across the yard. Eleven stood a few steps from the porch, a glare on her face that shook Max to her core. She came forward as Billy stood back up and Max ran to Will.

Whatever was left of Billy had disappeared deep inside him. His eyes turned orange and lip curled with a fiery cruelty. He shot streams of crackling blue currents at El but she pushed each one back. It was difficult though; he was strong. She broke his arm and he screamed in anger. Sparks shot from the transformer on the utility pole and the cables severed, falling onto the house where they continued to spasm.

"Get away from the house!" Hopper yelled and they could see from the sidewalk the smoke starting to rise from the roof. Billy laughed and pulled the flames down, snaking them along the siding and over the porch roof. They started to creep onto the grass and El used his distraction to throw him onto the porch. The flames grew larger as he stood basking in them. Max could feel the heat on her face, even from the sidewalk. El was breathing heavily, sweat dripping down her face. She felt weak, felt like she was failing yet again. She'd failed the boys, she'd failed Mike, she was going to fail Max. Anger and desperation tangled in her stomach.

"Billy, stop! Please!" Max yelled from her spot. Billy's response was to shoot a fireball at her, but it didn't make it halfway across the yard. It flew back at him, knocking him down. El screamed, felt her veins vibrating, and pushed hard, as hard as that night in the school.

The porch exploded.

Billy exploded.

All that remained was the smoking embers where the porch once was and the blood splattered across El's face and clothes.

It was over.

8. Chapter 8

They stood there looking at the scorched earth, the smoke rising, the flames still engulfing the top floor, for only a moment before a strangled wail came from Max, her fingers digging into her cheeks. She ran to El screaming, "You have to go back! You have to go back!"

Eleven didn't even try to stop her, accepting the punch to her shoulder, the fierce grip and shake of her arm. She felt sick inside. Vindication came with no relief. Will pulled Max off her, but she still felt sick. The taste of the blood running onto her lips didn't help. She wasn't sure whose it was.

Max clung to Will's arm as she sobbed and the man looked over at the rubble and tried to breathe. Sirens rang out in the distance.

"You time traveled here. You can go back and save him," she whimpered. "Please, you have to go back."

They were interrupted by fire trucks racing up the block, the firefighters jumping down before the vehicles fully stopped. Lucas pulled El to the sidewalk, keeping an arm around her shoulders. The others followed and they watched as water overtook the violent flames. The tufts of orange disappeared, leaving a blackened roof, holes that had collapsed in, and broken windows on the second floor. Will sighed; no one would be living in that house for a long time.

Hopper thought it would be best for them to leave the scene and let him handle things, so the rest took off for Dustin's house. It was a quiet, mournful walk, the sun setting behind them, casting their shadows across the pavement.

"He's my brother, he's all I have."

They sat at the kitchen table, still covered in files. Will had wrapped Max's arm as best he could, but still wondered if he should take her to the hospital. She was still lobbying for El to go back and save Billy. El hadn't said a word since they left the other house. Dustin had offered her his bathroom to wash up, but she had simply sat in one of

the chairs, curling up to make herself smaller. She wouldn't look at Max; she couldn't. She'd failed her, failed yet another friend. This was all her fault.

"Please?"

"Max, let's talk about it later," Will gently said.

"What if you went all the way back?" Dustin quietly asked, still thinking it through in his head.

"What?" Lucas asked.

"What if you went all the way back? To the beginning - to '83?"

"Dustin," Will said, a warning in his voice.

"I'm serious, you could save us all. You could... you could save Mike." El finally looked over at him, wiping a few stray tears from her dirty cheek. She didn't even bother with the blood that was quickly drying on her chin.

Will shook his head. "No, we can't send her back in. Who knows where she'll end up?!"

"Will, I think I can figure this out."

"I can't let you do this."

"But Mike, Will...*Mike*."

Will's voice dropped to a whisper, clearly conflicted inside. "She's a little girl, Dustin. She's just a little girl."

"I can do it."

They all turned to look at El, who was sitting straight up in her chair, face determined. "I want to do it."

Will shook his head. "El, it's way too dangerous. We don't know if you would even get back to the right year."

Dustin interrupted, "Will, I'm telling you, I can figure this out."

Will ignored him and continued to speak to Eleven. "You could have a normal life, you could live with me and Max. I would take care of you. You've done so much for us. Let us help you."

El shook her head sadly. "I wouldn't be happy. Knowing that I didn't do anything. I can do this."

Will opened his mouth to reply but Lucas spoke first. "I think we should let her do it. If that's what she wants, I'll support her."

El gave him a small smile and Will's shoulders slumped.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. Let's do this."

The next five days were a flurry of activity. Will and the girls bunked at Dustin's house, and Max was allowed the whole week off school. Lucas read through every file in the box and Dustin ran more calculations than he could count. Hopper was sent on another secret mission to the lab and El worked on gathering her strength, mostly through Eggos (she couldn't believe all the flavor options). By Saturday night the plan was ready to be unveiled.

Dustin sat at the head of the table, trying to contain his giddiness during this solemn time. He couldn't believe this was actually happening. This was a science dream come true. He cleared his throat before presenting the plan.

"Operation Butterfly is divided into two parts: return to 1983 and destroy the slugs. Through his extensive research of the stolen files, Lucas discovered that the lab found a way to kill all the slug particles, even the mucus, while still protecting the rats. Basically they created an antidote. Chief Hopper was kind enough to go back into the lab and steal some ingredients for us and...voilà!" He held up a tube filled with an opaque liquid. Everyone leaned forward in awe.

Max looked at Dustin, dumbfounded. "You were able to make the antidote?"

He smirked. "See, this is why you pay attention in science class."

"Cool," she said with a smile.

"What do I do with it?" El asked from the other end of the table.

"You're going to bring it back with you. And as soon as you're there, find Will and make him drink it."

Will jumped in. "Tell me you know about the slugs and the visions. Tell me you know I wash them down the sink. And tell me that it will save my family and friends. Maybe don't say that I sent you from the future though...I think that might freak me out."

El nodded seriously, taking everything he said into account.

"Will's right, don't mention the future thing. At least, not at first. Make sure he drinks the whole thing. It probably tastes awful. He might throw some of them up. If he does, burn them. Burn anything that comes out. So, I guess have him drink it outside."

"So what about the other part of the plan?" Max asked, foot nervously tapping the floor.

"El, you said you were somewhere else before you got to the Upside Down, right?"

"The black space. It's nothing."

"I think that's the key. What were you thinking when you were there?"

"I had to pull myself back together. I wanted to be whole again. I wanted to be safe."

"And I think that's where you jumped time. There in the black space. If you can get back in there, that's how you'll get back to '83. You'll need to specifically think about that time period. Concentrate on getting back to the school after you left."

"And she'll get back to that night?" Will asked.

"It might be off by a week or so. El, if you get there early, just lay low until that night, okay? And if you're late, that's all right, just find us right away. Find Will."

"How's she supposed to get back to the black space?" Lucas asked.

"I have to disappear again," El said, and Dustin and Lucas knew what she meant. The image of the science room had never left them either.

On Sunday they gathered on Mirkwood to see Eleven off. She stood in her freshly washed pink dress, looking exactly as she had when she arrived. Joyce clutched her close before saying goodbye, and Hopper shook her hand. She knew all that he couldn't say.

Max shuffled her feet and tried to look nonchalant when El stood before her.

"Good luck."

"I'll save him. I *promise*."

Max's lip trembled and she threw herself on El, wrapping her skinny arms tight. "Thank you," she whispered.

Will, Dustin and Lucas each hugged her, bittersweet expressions on their faces.

"Be careful," Will said.

"We'll see you soon," Dustin added.

"Thank you," Lucas finished. Tears filled his eyes.

She gave one last look to the group before crawling through the gate. They watched as she closed it up behind her. Then there was nothing. Just birds in the distance.

As they started the walk home, Lucas asked, "Do you think we'll know if it worked?"

"Well it really depends on what theory of time you're talking about," Dustin replied.

Will laughed as the two started to bicker, and stooped to let Max scramble up his back for a piggy-back ride. Even if he never saw

Eleven again, he was glad to have known her.

The darkness was back.

El struggled as she kept her atoms from floating too far apart. She'd done as Dustin had instructed, closing the gate once she was in the Upside Down and tapping into her strength to shatter herself apart once more.

She was screaming again, and she concentrated on her friends as she pushed herself back together. Will, Dustin, Lucas, *Mike*. The school, the bad men, the Demogorgon, *Mike*.

Suddenly there was cold and dampness all around her and she opened her eyes to find herself lying in the Upside Down, the vial of antidote still secure in her hand. She was back in the science classroom. After letting herself catch her breath for a moment, she crept out of the room.

In one of the hallways she found a sliver of a gate, most likely left over from when the Demogorgon had burst through the wall. That was a good sign. She hooked her fingers in the tear and cautiously ripped it open.

Mike Wheeler rolled his eyes as he watched his two friends wrestling on the floor, knocking over their game pieces. It had been a whole week since Will had returned and their adventure ended, and the boys were at the Byers' house visiting Will. The latter sat on the couch, still weak, but happy to have his friends nearby. They were keeping him company while Joyce and Jonathan finished up their late shifts.

The idea had been to play Monopoly but Dustin and Lucas had apparently decided WWF was more entertaining. A tapping at the door distracted Mike.

"Guys, I think someone's at the door."

"Maybe it's Jennifer Hayes!"

"Shut up!"

"Mike, can you get it?"

"Yeah, sure."

He wasn't sure what he had expected but it wasn't a familiar girl in a pink dress. For a moment they just stood there looking at each other, Eleven shaking from her walk. She finally spoke.

"You're alive." He thought he saw the corners of her mouth tremble.

"I'm alive? You're alive!" Her entire face crumpled and he tentatively pulled her in for a hug, whispering in her ear. "Hey, it's okay. You're okay. You're home."

"Holy shit!" They heard as Dustin ran over. "Lucas! It's El!"

Lucas tripped over his feet in his rush to the door, and Mike released El so the others could embrace her. They started asking her where she had been and how she got back but she looked at Mike. "Where's Will?"

"Oh you haven't really met him! Here, he's in the living room." He made to lead her in, but she rushed past him. He frowned - was she more excited to see Will than him?

The boys found her hunched next to Will, softly talking to him as his eyes widened and his face paled. She brandished a small tube from her pocket and he nodded seriously before getting up.

"Uh, El, what's going on?" Mike asked.

"Will needs to do something," she replied. Will was grabbing his coat and shoes.

"Wait, why are you going outside? He's not supposed to be out, it's cold."

El grabbed his shirt and looked hard at him. "This is very important," she slowly said, emphasizing each word. "I promise," she added, her eyes softening. He trusted her, trusted her always, and nodded.

"Okay."

She smiled and followed Will out. The other three looked at each other before scrambling to put on their shoes and follow.

Will was drinking whatever was in the vial, and from the looks of it the stuff must have tasted awful. El patted his back until he was done.

"Uh...so why are we doing this?" Dustin asked. But suddenly Will started to cough, more and more violently until it turned to heaving. The boys started to protest in alarm but Eleven held up her hand.

"Wait."

Will gave one more heave and out of his mouth dropped a slug.

"What the hell is that?" Lucas exclaimed.

El pulled out a pack of matches from her pocket and lit one before tossing it on the slug. It was immediately engulfed in a greenish flame.

"Woah!"

"You have to burn them," El explained.

Will threw up two more slugs that night, and they were careful to burn them all. The boys desperately wanted to ask El what was going on, but sensed that she didn't want to talk about it. Even Dustin managed to hold back his questions. Mike thought she looked more tired than before, more worn. He wondered what happened to her during the past week. Whatever it was, it seemed to have greatly affected her.

Eleven never forgot her time in the future, a dream that haunted her through the years. When the Byers took her in, when Hopper and Joyce finally rekindled their relationship, it was there. When she went to the Snow Ball, when they won science fairs, when they had sleepovers, it was there. When she met the new neighbors, newlyweds, it was there. Smiles, fights, college visits, graduations,

the entire year of 1988 - it was there.

A few months after she returned, El and Mike sat in his basement, talking about everything and nothing. After a lull in the conversation, Mike asked a question that had danced around his mind every night.

"What happened...before you came back?"

El stared off for a while before whispering, "It feels like a dream now."

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want."

"Someday." She gave a tiny smile. "Someday."

9. Epilogue

December 31, 1987

The Wheelers decided to throw a proper New Year's party that year. The Sinclairs, the Hendersons, Joyce and Hopper all attended, along with various neighbors, parents from the PTA and coworkers of Ted's. Mike pulled at the collar of the starched shirt his mother had insisted he wear. He was looking for his girlfriend, who had seemed to disappear, and eventually found her in the dining room, near the trays of hors d'oeuvres. She was lovely in a black velvet dress with her hair loosely braided, but deftly slipped out of the room before he could reach her.

Eleven had been acting aloof all night, barely looking his way. He wondered if she was mad at him, if he had done something wrong. Usually if she were upset about something she would come to him for comfort and advice. But every once in a while she'd have a quiet day, a day she spent lost in thought. Mike always felt useless on those days. He almost hoped that it was his fault instead. At least that way he could do something about it and maybe then he could salvage the holiday for her.

A few minutes before midnight, Karen called everyone to the living room and champagne was handed out. The boys stood near the doorway, Mike craning his neck but unable to see El. Dustin noticed and gave him a friendly nudge. "I thought you'd be the only one of us to get a New Year's Kiss."

"I dunno, Mrs. Crawley looks pretty lonely..." Lucas smirked and Dustin shuddered. Will swirled the champagne in his glass and Mike ignored them all. Where did she go?

The countdown started, the adults all smiling at each other with rosy cheeks as they chanted. Time seemed to slow to a crawl.

"3..." She appeared at his side.

"2..." She looked up at him, head slightly cocked.

"1..." Her eyes flitted all over his face and he felt like she was looking into his soul.

"Happy New Year!" Her lips parted, revealing just a sliver of space.

Mike was planning on just a quick peck - their parents were in the room, and he still wasn't sure if she was annoyed with him. But her hand snaked its way to the back of his head, pulling it down to her, fingers curling into his hair. The kiss was short but hard, almost desperate, and she pressed her forehead to his with a loud exhale before they broke apart. Well, he was not expecting *that*. She avoided his eyes afterward, turning to kiss the other boys' cheeks.

After the toast, the gang slipped away to the basement, seeking refuge from the drunk adults. They themselves were tipsy from the glass of champagne they had each been allowed. Not ones to usually drink, they were all lightweights. El kicked off her heels and the boys rolled up their sleeves to get more comfortable. Lucas suggested Truth or Dare, recalling how they used to obsessively play it freshman year. But it was late and the game quickly devolved to just Truth, the group sitting in a circle on the carpet, snacks piled in the middle.

After the stories behind Lucas' first kiss, Mike's most embarrassing moment, and Dustin's favorite comic book, it was El's turn.

"El, truth or dare?" Dustin asked, even though he knew what her answer would be.

"Truth."

Dustin gave a strange look and hesitated before asking his question. "Okay, well, there's something I've always wanted to ask you. What happened after you defeated the Demogorgon? Before you came back. Where did you go during that week?"

She gave him a long stare before flicking her eyes around the group. Perhaps... perhaps it was time. A secret that had been weighing on her soul for years now.

"Okay."

Dustin's eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Yeah." She smiled. "I bet you won't believe me though."

Lucas scoffed. "Are you kidding? We've seen monsters and flying vans. You can't surprise us."

"And we trust you," Will added. "We know you wouldn't make something up."

She glanced at Mike, who looked back with wide eyes.

"Please?" he asked. He'd always wondered.

She turned back to Dustin and nodded. "Okay. I went to the future."

"What?"

"No way!"

"Oh my god."

"That's awesome!"

She laughed at the shock on their faces. "I did! After I left you guys I ended up in the Upside Down and found a gate on Mirkwood. And then I was in 2005."

"What was it like?" Lucas asked, just as Will asked,

"Were you still in Hawkins?"

"Yep."

"Did you meet us?" Dustin practically whispered, his eye sparkling. This was way cooler than he had been expecting.

"I did." They all leaned forward, curious and almost frightened to learn more.

She giggled. "Will, you were the first one I met. You worked at the newspaper and you lived in that little house on the corner of Cherry and Oak. You know, the one with the wraparound porch? It's white

now but it was blue when I was there. And you had two foster kids."

"What?"

"Yeah. A girl, Max, who was 12. She found me after I came through the gate. She brought me home and it just so happened that it was your house. And she had a brother, Billy, who was like 16. He was..." She paused and made a face. Mike furrowed his brow.

"Wow."

She smiled again and continued. "Dustin, you were the science teacher."

"What?"

"At the middle school. You had Mr. Clarke's job. You lived over on Mercer."

"What did I look like?"

She shrugged. "You looked like you, but...older. It was weird. I had just seen you the day before and suddenly you were grown up."

"This is wild."

She turned to Lucas. "Lucas lived in Wisconsin. You worked at a college and I think you had a girlfriend."

Dustin and Will made kissing noises and playfully shoved Lucas' shoulders. He just puffed out his chest and smirked.

"You came back to Hawkins while I was there, to help. But you didn't want to at first. You were mad at me."

His face fell. "Really? Jesus, El, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. I don't really blame you."

"What about me?" Mike asked and her heart dropped. She turned her head to meet his eyes.

"You weren't there."

He wrinkled his nose in confusion. "What? Did I live far away or something? I didn't come home to see you?"

"Like Wheeler would have ever stayed away," Dustin laughed, but was soon interrupted by El.

"You had died. That's why you weren't there." Her eyes were wet but she managed to keep her face together.

Mike felt like he had been punched in the gut. Dead? The thought was too much for him to wrap his head around. The others were silent, staring at him.

"How..." He couldn't finish the sentence. She took a deep, shaky breath.

"You jumped into the quarry." Dustin dropped the cookie he was holding. "Because you thought I would catch you." Will felt faint. "On a November night." Lucas thought he might be sick. "In 1988."

Mike's mouth opened but no words emerged. She gave a watery smile, because it was the only thing keeping her from falling apart. This was the weight she had carried, the nightmares she had suffered from, the secret burning in her mind. "That's why I was acting weird today. This is the year that you died." Her voice could only whisper the last word but she managed not to cry. She took another breath to steady herself before turning to Lucas.

"Lucas was there. You told me about it, before I came back. You tried to stop him, but he thought he could hear me. He thought I was there. And you were too far away to grab him and pull him back. So you had to watch him jump." She paused, a few tears having trailed down her cheeks. Lucas stared at her in horror. "That's why you were mad at me. Because I didn't come to save him. You thought I killed him."

Mike, completely overwhelmed by her story, lashed out at his friend. "Why did you blame her?"

Lucas threw up his hands in defense. "Whoa, I didn't even do this!"

"It's fine. Mike, it's fine. Of course he was upset."

Mike stood up, feeling as if the room was closing in on him. "I need to get some air." He shoved his feet into a pair of boots and walked out the backdoor, roughly closing it behind him.

Lucas stood to follow him, but El grabbed his pant leg. "Don't. Give him a little bit."

"Yeah," Dustin agreed. "Dude just found out he died." He shook his head in disbelief.

Lucas sat back down and she told them more of the story - the slugs, the lab, the voices, Max, Billy, the fire. By the end they sat there shellshocked, each unable to look anywhere but the carpet. Mike still hadn't returned, so she slipped her stocking feet into the nearest pair of boots, much too large for her, and trudged out after him, a blanket wrapped close around her. He was sitting on the picnic table and staring off at the trees. He stayed silent as she sat beside him, but accepted some of the blanket.

After a moment she asked, "What are you thinking?"

"That it makes sense now."

"What does?"

"The first thing you said to me when you got back, when you were standing at Will's door, was 'You're alive.' And you looked almost...*shocked* when you said it. And I was confused because of course I was alive! You had saved me, you knew that. But...shit." He finally looked at her.

"I killed myself?" He asked, his tone incredulous. "That's how I went. Fuck."

"It was more complicated than that." He listened as she explained that he was infected, the voices, the dreams. "You weren't fully in control of yourself."

"Still..."

"I know."

Mike dropped his face onto his hands, turning to rest his cheek and look at her. He smiled. "You saved me again."

El nodded, looking at the dead leaves poking up from under the snow. He was right, but it was so much more than that.

"It wasn't just that, it wasn't just you. It was all of them. They had hard lives. I mean, the slugs...they affected everything. That's why I had to get rid of them. It wasn't just to save Will, or even just to save you. It was to save everyone. Even a couple of kids who haven't been born yet." She pressed her eyelids tightly together. Mike noticed the slump in her shoulders, an exhaustion he had never fully seen before.

He gently cupped her chin and turned her head so she would look at him, rubbing his thumb along her jawline. "You are the bravest person I have ever known. And keeping all that a secret for so long...that must have been really hard. That must have been lonely."

Her mouth twitched and he could tell she was trying not to cry. He wrapped one arm around her back and pulled her in, keeping his mouth close to her ear.

"It's okay," he whispered. "We know now. *I* know. You're not alone. You're okay. You're home."

And suddenly she was twelve again, seeing him alive and whole for the first time, as he told her she was home. She finally let herself cry - large, ugly sobs she had always reserved for when she was alone. But she wasn't alone anymore.

They would never fully understand. But she wasn't alone.